with a similar twist, this time on the well-known nursery rhyme "Little Boy Blue." The original poem (taken by some as in part an implicit attack on Cardinal Wolsey's ostentatious lifestyle) is as follows: "Little Boy Blue come blow your horn. / The sheep's in the meadow the cow's in the corn. / But where's the boy who looks after the sheep? / He's under a haystack fast asleep. / Will you wake him? No, not I—for if I do, he's sure to cry."

Here is a disruption, through inattention and laziness, of humanity's rightful relationship to and ordering of the natural world. In Ruffin's poem, the poet calls on the boy to wake up and blow his horn as an alarm, yet the poem ends with a dark foreboding that the ongoing human abandonment of the agrarian life for the excesses of industrialism and a lethal technology may well lead to oblivion: "Up and blow, boy, blow to / the skies, but know that your / tune is lost on casual green and blue. / As you wish, stand and blow, / though bronze to iron to atom / to dreamless sleep is the way / that this story will go." But dire as such a prophecy is, the way to avoid it is also, by implication both here and in other poems, clearly indicated.

Paul Ruffin is one of those poets—all too rare—whose poems are full of wisdom and just ring true to life so that the reader, unless blindly committed to some radical ideology out of harmony with natural law and universal human experience, must simply say that this is the way life is and act accordingly. In my prefatory remarks as poetry editor for *Modern Age* ("In the Beginning: A Note from the Poetry Editor," Winter 2008, pages 58–60), I quoted a list of fourteen benchmarks for a successful poem compiled by Ruffin's fellow Alabama-born poet John Finlay (1941–1991), who also knew country life in the rural South. Of those points, the following stands out prominently in relation to Ruffin's verse: "It must be of the physical world, have winter mornings, summer nights, stripped trees, creeks, smoke, smells, the reflection of a star in a bucket of water, etc. in it so that the reader will say, 'Oh, yes, this is just the way it really is.'"

An Unflinching Defense of Modernism

Jeffrey Folks

What Ever Happened to Modernism? by Gabriel Josipovici (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010)

Every so often a book comes along that, while faulty in overall conception, addresses crucial issues in an especially productive way. Gabriel Josipovici's *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* is a flawed but quite thoughtful effort to vindicate an aesthetic vision—that of high modernism—that few would now defend in such an unreserved manner. In the course of this defense, Josipovici forces the reader to confront essential aesthetic and moral questions and to clarify his own thinking in relation to the philosophical assumptions that underlie modernist art. In this respect, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*

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performs a most valuable service. Far more than a historical review of the modernist movement, Josipovici's book cuts to the heart of the question: not just "what happened" to modernism but why modernism should have arisen to begin with and why, especially within Anglo-American criticism, it has fallen so quickly from favor (or, as Josipovici argues, was never really understood or accepted in the first place).

In this earnest and admittedly personal manifesto, Josipovici argues for the centrality of Proust, Kafka, and Beckett in modern literature and beyond that for the crucial importance of those high-modernist painters, artists, and musicians who constituted the experimental vanguard of the early twentieth century. The shared quality of these artists would seem to be their insistence on pressing toward the extreme, by means of which effort alone art was thought to afford meaning. As Kafka wrote, "Literature helps me to live," an assertion that those familiar with Kafka's biography might well question but that nonetheless plays a key role in Josipovici's book. The issues Josipovici raises, in fact, have everything to do with the relationship of art and experience. Is the fundamental virtue of art, as Kafka asserted, that it makes possible the survival of an authentic selfhood in the face of what modernists conceive as a barbarous culture of materialism and conventionality? Is the maintenance of the artist's pure sensibility the most important consideration, and is the assumption that ordinary life has descended into deathly philistinism an accurate one?

Contrary to all that Josipovici says in *Modernism*, one might suggest that what the high modernists failed to comprehend was precisely this: art's place within a public sphere of activity that includes obligations to family, country, religion, and so much else. This truth was obvious to the great writers in the classic tradition: Virgil, Dante, and Chaucer among them. Even among modern writers, one can point to the work of traditionalists such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, Saul Bellow, Philip Larkin, Flannery O'Connor, and V. S. Naipaul, all of whom were modernists in some sense but not in terms of elevating the artistic sensibility above the common experience of mankind. Josipovici either ignores or dismisses these writers, preferring to take as his examples of traditionalism Anthony Powell, Angus Wilson, and Iris Murdoch—writers of a different order of talent entirely. While he does briefly discuss Dickens, Josipovici never comes to terms with the greatness of this author, nor does he explain Dickens's enduring influence. Nor can he explain the lasting importance of Jane Austen, a writer whom he far too readily dismisses as one overly confident that she stood "on solid ground." Could it be that Dickens and Austen were right and that the artist, shaping artistic work from experience, really does stand on solid ground, or at least on ground that is more solid that Josipovici would have us believe?

It may be that the supposed falling off of art that Josipovici perceives in the contemporary period is not so much a decline as evidence of a healthy reassessment of the misguided aims of high modernism. The very art that Josipovici celebrates as the high tide of Western civilization, the modernism of Hofmannstahl, Mallarmé, Proust, James, Kafka, Beckett, Borges, Nabokov, Spark, Robbe-Grillet, Pinget, and Golding, and of analogous figures within the fine arts, has, after all, come to be viewed with somewhat greater skepticism by many contemporary critics. In posing the question of what actually happened to modernism—the sense of its having arrived at a sudden dead end, especially

within British and American culture, and its general dismissal within the broader society—Josipovici approaches but then backs away from the plain truth that the modernist aesthetic was simply too hostile and forbidding in its radical vision of aesthetic purity.

While one may doubt Josipovici's argument that Western art achieved its pinnacle in the first decades of the twentieth century, and even then largely among Continental writers and artists, one cannot help but admire the intelligence and breadth of learning that he brings to the task. Moving adroitly from one major figure to another and among the various arts, Josipovici displays an impressive grasp of the issues and argues forcefully for the validity of the high-modernist aesthetic. Taking its cue from Erich Heller's theory of alienation from tradition, Josipovici's fundamental argument is that modern narrative beginning with Cervantes is "about the place of art . . . in a world where disenchantment has eroded our confidence in the sacramental." On a purely theoretical level, Josipovici's sweeping application of Heller's theory of disenchantment might seem persuasive. When applied to cases, however, Josipovici's approach is less convincing, as is evident in what he says about Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment.* As Josipovici views Raskolnikov, the character is an analogue of Napoleon, the nineteenth-century "great man" whose virtue of radical self-creativity was echoed in a host of others figures, both historical and fictional. Yet to present Raskolnikov in this way, and to do so as if this were Dostoyevsky's view of him, is to seriously distort the novel's intention. In Dostoyevsky's mind, as Joseph Frank's exhaustive research into the author's letters and background makes clear, Raskolnikov represents for the author the corrupt spirit of a restless age. The phenomenon of romantic self-consciousness that Josipovici views as a crucial step toward modernist cultural emancipation is for Dostoyevsky a tragic misstep.

So it is with much of what Josipovici has to say about the modern age. The emphasis on perception over content that pervades his aesthetics betrays a naive capacity to wonder at manifestations of a secondary order and an incapacity to credit what is primary: the moral imagination of the writer and of man. Inevitably, Josipovici's thinking draws one to the conclusion that the ordinary world of experience is merely "constructed" by the unreflective force of tradition and convention. Josipovici objects, for example, to the way in which within conventional landscape painting perspective is constructed with an end to ease, comfort, orderliness, and meaning. It was Cezanne, he believes, who first broke decisively with this "unnatural" treatment of objects and who forced the viewer into an uncomfortable but presumably vital relation with reality. But, one may ask, why should one wish to be ill at ease and confused? Why should one discard the centuries of artistic effort that made possible an ordered relation to an otherwise anarchic array of visual stimuli? Why should one wish to descend into the very same condition of simplicity and disorder that prevailed before the rise of the world's great civilizations?

In point of fact, does not the affinity of modernist art and writing with any number of primitive and even prehistoric means of expression simply attest the level of mischievous discontent with Western civilization emerging since the rise of Romanticism rather than any defect in that civilization itself? Furthermore, if disenchantment is the primary motive for so much of modernist art, as Josipovici finds, can that art be considered anything but a fleeting reaction grounded in the shallow

discontent of an affluent class of artists and intellectuals and not the reflection of the far more significant human impulses of striving toward goodness and well-being? Is not this very shallowness the reason why modernist art never achieved anything more than a coterie audience interested in staking out its privileged status in relation to the so-called philistine middle class, and is it not the reason why modernist art is now so widely dismissed?

The damage that high modernism has wrought is real enough, and this fact relates to an important aspect of Josipovici's critical practice. Again and again, Josipovici insists that modernist art must be judged in terms of its artistic refinement—its style or intellectual complexity—in isolation from and with disregard for its content and especially its moral qualities. In this respect, Josipovici is merely echoing the critical perspective of his great exemplars, Paul Valéry and Roland Barthes, and of a long tradition of Continental theorists who have embraced "pure" forms of art—aestheticism, surrealism, nihilism—in contrast to the forms of realism associated with bourgeois culture. But the notion that the Continental tradition was somehow liberated from the "compromises" of moral decision making is, of course, preposterous. The tradition that Josipovici champions, culminating in the radical ontological skepticism of writers like Beckett and Pinter, is deeply engaged in a moral and political assault on Western tradition. Taking the part of a cultural elite whose social and political views are strongly biased against the middle class, these modernists are not the detached creators they pretend to be: they are foot soldiers in an ongoing war against the ever-expanding influence of democratic capitalism.

Josipovici never acknowledges the fact that art has an obligation to advance the broader well-being of human beings. But if it did not—if, in fact, art were to be devoted in earnest to undermining the civilization of which it is a part—what possible motive could that civilization have for supporting those who create it or those who interpret and promote it? This consideration is not only absent from Josipovici's reflections on modernism: it is held in contempt, as if, as an extension of bourgeois complacency and self-interestedness, it were a lower order of response. The question for Josipovici then becomes whether it is not necessary at some level for human beings to concern themselves with matters of self-interest? Is this concern not inextricable from the most essential of human instincts, that of survival?

Josipovici will have none of this. In his view the realm of art is separated entirely from that of necessity. Not surprisingly, the "meaning" of modernist art, to the extent it can be distinguished at all, seems always to confirm the inconclusiveness, indeterminacy, and ambiguity of experience. Who can say, for example, what might be the meaning of Duchamp's *Fountain* or his *Large Glass*, which, Josipovici admits, "it is difficult to know whether to take seriously or as a spoof"? Much the same could be said for John Cage's "Buddhist-inspired" compositions or Robert Pinget's *Passacaille,* a novel that Josipovici considers to be a masterpiece of late modernism, or for any number of modernist works.

One finishes reading *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* with considerable skepticism as to what Josipovici has to say but with admiration for the author's willingness to defend his position in a forthright and unflinching manner. In this articulate and informed defense of the aesthetic basis of high modernism, Josipovici makes the case that artists such as Kafka, Proust, and Beckett were not only significant cultural experimentalists: they were, in Josipovici's opinion, indispensable to the advancement

of civilization. One may disagree with Josipovici's idea of advancement, but his book is nonetheless a valuable contribution to criticism in that it clarifies the fundamental divide within modern culture: the opposition between modernists who accept that a brave new world has come about and traditionalists who believe that the condition of man is much as it has always been and that, as a result, art cannot depart radically from what it has been in the past.

Common Sense and Pragmatism as Philosophical Grounds for Politics

Joseph Amato

America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense by Scott Philip Segrest (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2010)

With this bold and well-written work, Scott Philip Segrest—an instructor in American politics at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point—makes a bid to join the conservative tradition of German refugee, philosopher of history, and political thinker Eric Voegelin (1901–1985). He sees his work as an explicit effort to fulfill Voegelin's suggestion that "someone write a history of the common sense tradition," which Voegelin discovered in the early 1920s in the course of attending pragmatist John Dewey's Columbia University lectures on the American and British tradition of philosophy. Throughout his work, Segrest repeatedly affirms Voegelin's main proposition that the transcendent is found within the operation of human spirit and civilization's search for order.

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In addition to his primary goals of defining the worth of the commonsense school of thought, establishing it as distinctly embodied in the American political tradition, and acknowledging that the commonsense tradition was significantly anticipated by Aristotle's epistemology and shared common ground with eighteenth-century natural rights advocates like Jefferson, Segrest contends that the school was best given form by three American protagonists, the first two of whom were illustrious Scottish immigrants who, the cream of a thriving Scottish university education, were outstanding students of philosophy and divinity, and Presbyterian ministers as well.

The first of these Scots, a signatory of the Declaration of Independence, John Witherspoon (1723–1794), was invited in midlife to serve as president of Princeton College in the 1760s. The second, James McCosh (1811–1894), became president of the same college, almost exactly one hundred years later. The third, psychologist and philosopher William James of New England, gave the commonsense tradition a fresh and enduring vitality.

As both a creator and representative of the commonsense tradition in America, John Witherspoon was influenced by such commonsense progenitors as philosophers